

Ironing Out the Kinks by dontburnthewitch

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Summary: For Will, the holiday season is a mixed bag.

Ironing Out the Kinks

"Thank you so much for your help, sweetie," Joyce said, a box of tangled cords between her arms.

"No problem," Mike said, trying his best to stay balanced on the rickety wooden ladder perched against the Byers residence. He reached into the pocket of his windbreaker, pulling out a fistful of little clips to pin the Christmas lights in place along the eaves.

Once he finished the line, Joyce passed him the extension cord and stood guard over the ladder's base while Mike plugged in the setup. He carefully descended, watching the decorations flicker on, casting sprawling rainbows against the fresh snow.

"It's wonderful," Joyce said, setting down the box and pulling Mike into a hug. "Usually Jonathan does this sort of thing, but y'know, he's off at college, and Will's not exactly tall enough to reach, and you're just the perfect height..."

Mike smiled, giving a modest shrug. Joyce cut herself off from babbling. Mike laid the ladder on its side near the driveway and she led him back inside.

Over the last couple years, Mike had gotten quite used to seeing the Byers household in various states of disrepair. Yet, with only Joyce and Will occupying the house, they sure did a good job keeping the place tidy. The musty yellow striped blanket lay folded on the back of the sofa, and the throw pillows were arranged neatly on the flowery armchair. The room was bathed in the spectrum cast by the festive lights outside, and the incandescent hue slipping from the kitchen.

"Is there anything I can get you, Mike?" Joyce asked, bustling around the kitchen counter and filling up a mug. "Coffee?"

"No thanks," Mike declined, eyes searching the strangely empty house. "Where's Will?"

Joyce blew on her drink to cool it off, "Oh, he's probably in his room drawing."

Mike nodded, trotting off down the hall to Will's bedroom. He knocked on the door. Receiving no answer, called out, "Hey, Will? You in there?"

Still getting no response, he twisted the doorknob and swung the door open.

Will's room, though an absolute mess compared to the rest of the house, was empty. Distress began to worm its way up Mike's throat.

"Will?"

He stepped inside, socks crunching on scraps of crumpled paper that had missed the waste basket. Making his way around Will's bed, he glanced up at the corkboard hanging over his desk. Will must have taken down most of the illustrations he usually displayed there, replacing them with photos instead. Most of them were seemingly taken by Jonathan. They had that artsy monochrome vibe, bringing to mind the covers of the LPs he'd often seen laying on Jonathan's bed.

A few pictures weren't Jonathan's, though. Mike recognized two of them Joyce took earlier that year. The first showed the six of them - Mike, El, Will, Lucas, Max and Dustin - with arms linked around each other, standing in Will's front yard, springtime blooming around them. Dustin's head was perched on Lucas's shoulder, with the latter boy shooting him a questioning look while Max grinned. Will was showing off a toothy smile, and Mike was focused somewhere off the side of the frame with El's hand firmly on his waist.

The second photo brought warmth creeping to Mike's chest - just he and Will, standing at the entrance to Hawkins Middle School on their last day there, fingers linked like they were glued together. Will looked like he was practically drowning in one of his brother's oversized Joy Division t-shirts. In the months since, Will had definitely started to grow into his hand-me-downs. Jonathan left behind a whole crate full of clothes that he couldn't take to college, giving Will the freedom of picking through them and choosing the ones he liked.

High school was bringing on less stress than Mike had anticipated. He

finally felt like they were all moving on from the events of the previous two years. Will seemed much happier, and Mike couldn't be more glad. He'd spent so long quietly dealing with flashbacks and night terrors, and while he still did have the odd episode, improvement kept coming. In fact, it felt like they were all doing much better than they ever had. Dustin and Lucas got along great now, and all of them took turns helping El catch up on the years of schoolwork she'd missed. Things were working out. All they had to do was work out the kinks along the way.

"Hey."

Mike nearly jumped out of his skin. He whipped around, seeing Will's face peeking from the doorway.

"Where were you?" Mike asked.

"Do you know what a 'number two' is?"

Mike laughed, "Hey, I set up those lights. You wanna come see?"

Will took a few steps forward and plunked down on his bed. He shook his head and brushed his bangs from his eyes.

"Sorry," he said, stretching his limbs out. "I'm not feeling up to it."

Mike pushed the door closed and brought himself over to Will's bed, seating himself next to his friend.

"What's up?" he asked, sliding close to Will.

"I'm still having trouble with the Christmas lights," he said.

"Didn't they set them up last year?" Mike asked.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Will thumped his palms on his thighs. "I didn't feel like it. Mom and Jonathan love Christmas. I mean, I do too, but it's still kinda tough to get past... certain things."

"I totally get it," Mike said, fidgeting with his digital watch. "But you remember what Hopper told us? It's not going to go away completely. It'll get better, but it's gonna be there forever. What was it he said? Like, 'it's part of who you are and you have to accept that' or something?"

"I have accepted it," Will replied. "Thinking about it, in concept, I don't have a problem with Christmas or the lights or anything. I'm just worried about what my brain will do without me controlling it, you know?"

Mike sat, thinking about this for a moment. Will watched him, his gaze tracing over Mike's features - his chestnut curls, aquiline nose dotted with freckles, and soft lips pulling into a smile.

"Wait here," Mike said, patting Will on the back and scuttling out of the room.

Will heard muffled voices briefly coming from the kitchen, but wasn't able to make out conversation. When Mike didn't come back after five minutes, Will strolled over to his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. He tried, as hard as he could, to commit the details of Mike's face to the page. His profile was so strikingly unique that Will found it surprisingly easy to duplicate. Strangely angular, yet soft. Mike never stood up totally straight, his neck jutting forward awkwardly, only amplified by puberty and the accompanying lankiness. He'd only just began to shade in the cheekbones when he heard a knock.

Mike stood looking cold and tapping at the already open door.

"Hey, come on," he beckoned Will towards him, holding out Will's jacket and boots. "I've got something to show you."

Will slipped into his outside gear and followed his friend to the front door, glancing over at his mom sitting on front of the television. She smiled at him, tucking herself into a blanket and lighting up a cigarette.

Mike held the door for Will. He grabbed Will's hand and tugged him out into the front yard, spinning him around once they stood in the driveway.

"Ta-dah!" Mike shouted, throwing his arms in gesture towards the house.

"I don't get it?" Will said

He looked over the boring building - dark and unassuming among the trees lining the property. The same as it always was. It was only brightened by the glow pooling from the living room window. That's when he realized.

"Wait," Will turned to Mike. "You took them down? But you just spent like an hour putting them up!"

"Well, I talked to your mom and she agreed it was the best course of action," Mike said proudly.

"You didn't have to."

"No, I didn't," Mike said. "But if you're not comfortable with it, then I'm not. Besides, you've still got the wreath on the door. Still festive."

Will squeezed Mike, fiercely pressing his face against Mike's shoulder. Mike returned the embrace, resting his chin against Will's forehead. He exhaled, blowing puffs of fog into the cold air.

"I know you don't want to be treated like you're fragile or something," Mike said. "But I think it's good to take small steps. Iron out the kinks, you know?"

Will sighed in contentment. Mike could never make him feel like he was weak, or fragile, or lesser than anyone. To Mike, he was always an equal. With Mike, he was strong and brave. He felt like he could fight anything and win. And he was going to. He knew he could do this - not just make things normal, but better.

When they returned to Will's room, Mike couldn't help but notice the portrait on the desk. For a moment, Will thought he ought to feel embarrassed. Yet, a part of his mind reminded him how Mike hardly judged him.

"Is my nose really that big?" Mike asked.

"What?"

"My nose," Mike repeated, a finger hovering between his eyes and his brows knit together. "I know it's big, but I didn't think it was that big."

Will came over to him, peering around his shoulder at the drawing. He picked it up, comparing it side-by-side with Mike's face, squinting in concentration.

"Maybe it's a little off," Will said. He pointed to his eraser, saying, "I can fix that."

"Okay," Mike said, brow still furrowed.

"Hey," Will set the drawing back on his desk. He cupped Mike's cheek in his hand, meeting his eyes. "Your nose is perfectly fine."

"What are you talking about? It's gross. I've got a frog-face," Mike said, echoing the words he'd been tormented with since childhood.

"Mike, would I draw you like that if you were gross?"

Mike scoffed, "Who knows?"

"I know!" Will said. "And I know I wouldn't. Mike, trust me, you look fine. Great actually. And remember what Hopper said to me? 'It's part of who you are and you have to accept that' - right?"

A smirk snuck upon Mike's lips. He pushed Will playfully and leaned back onto the bed, laying his head on the pillows.

"You're too precious, Byers."

Will leapt over and laid down next to him, throwing an arm across Mike's waist and putting his head on his chest. He bobbed up and down ever-so-slightly with each slow breath Mike took. Fingers traced up and he rested his palm over Mike's ribs, feeling the calm heartbeat thudding beneath.

Things were getting better. It was a slow process, but not excruciatingly so. Will thought of applying some adage, like how

'Rome wasn't built in a day' but it felt too corny. He was perfectly satisfied laying here with his best friend, keeping things as simple and carefree as possible, and letting time heal all the wounds it could.

With Mike, he scarcely felt fear anymore. He certainly hoped Mike felt the same way. And Will knew that if they'd made it this far, they could make it through anything. They'd conquer this world, the Upside Down, and any other beasts lurking deep in the shadows, one step at a time.